

*Task Force on the Future
of U.S.-Israel Relations*

STRENGTHENING *the* PARTNERSHIP

How to Deepen U.S.-Israel
Cooperation on the
Iranian Nuclear Challenge



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Published in 2008 in the United States of America by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050, Washington, DC 20036.

Design by Daniel Kohan, Sensical Design and Communication

Front cover: With American and Israeli flags in the background, Israeli soldiers await the arrival of Vice President Richard Cheney and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem, March 18, 2002. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Elizabeth Dalziel.



2008 PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCES

Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Israel Relations

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JUNE 2008

PREFACE

EVERY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION year since 1988, The Washington Institute has convened a Presidential Study Group of statesmen, diplomats, legislators, scholars, and experts to examine the state of the Middle East and the effectiveness of U.S. policy toward the region, and to offer their collective advice on Middle East policymaking to a new administration. Time and again, this bipartisan effort has proven itself quite successful at injecting “new thinking” into the policy process at precisely the moment when it is most needed.

This year, we are taking a different tack. With the Middle East having emerged over the past several years as the focal point of American foreign policy, a complex array of Middle Eastern–related issues now compete for the urgent attention of our nation’s leaders. A single report that assesses all of those issues and offers recommendations on each of them runs the risk of being less than the sum of its parts.

Therefore, this year, The Washington Institute has decided to support the establishment of three independent Presidential Task Forces. Each will be composed of its own bipartisan, blue-ribbon group of experts and practitioners, and each charged with addressing a discrete issue high on the Middle East policy agenda.

This is the report of the first of these initiatives—the Presidential Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Israel Relations. Over the next several months, the Institute looks forward to publishing the reports of its two cousins—the Task Force on Countering the Ideology of Radical Islamist Extremism and the Task Force on Combating Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East.

The Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Israel Relations met on a number of occasions in 2007 and 2008 in the Institute’s offices and over a two-day retreat with ten Israeli counterparts at the Lansdowne Conference Center in Virginia. We thank all those in the U.S. and Israeli governments for their assistance and

cooperation with briefings and background information that helped inform the work of the Task Force.

Early on, the Task Force decided to issue a relatively brief statement of policy analysis and recommendations rather than a lengthy report, so as to highlight the key findings that emerged from its deliberations. This policy statement is a distillation of the Task Force’s months-long effort and represents many weeks of writing, drafting, and critiquing. The policy statement reflects the broad, bipartisan consensus of the Task Force members. Not every signatory endorses every judgment or recommendation in the statement. Members have endorsed this statement solely in their individual capacities, and their endorsements do not necessarily suggest those of the institutions or political campaigns with which they currently may be affiliated.

The Task Force would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided by the entire staff of The Washington Institute in organizing its meetings and preparing this publication. Special thanks go to Ben Fishman, Rebecca Saxton, and Zachary Snyder, who supported the group’s work intellectually, organizationally, and administratively.

The work of the Task Force and the visit of Israel to our Lansdowne retreat were made possible by a generous endowment established by the Soref Foundation to support this quadrennial exercise. Neither the Foundation nor The Washington Institute, however, had input in or control over the Task Force’s deliberations. This policy statement has not been endorsed by the Institute, its Board of Trustees, or its Board of Advisors, and it should not be construed as representing their views.

Dennis Ross
Co-convenor

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Co-convenor

STATEMENT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONS

We, members of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Presidential Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Israel Relations, met periodically in 2007 and 2008 and reviewed the substantial agenda of the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship. Recognizing that many issues on that agenda are of vital importance to U.S. interests, we decided to focus this brief Statement of Analysis and Recommendations on the item we determined deserves the urgent attention of our nation's leaders. The Task Force therefore issues the following statement:

SIXTY YEARS AFTER American diplomatic recognition of the state of Israel, and as Israel is engaged in new peacemaking efforts with the Palestinian Authority and Syria, the prospect that the Islamic Republic of Iran may successfully develop a nuclear weapons capability could confront the United States and Israel with the most serious challenge in the history of their relationship.

For America, this is a major challenge, one that could destroy the international nonproliferation regime and spark a Middle East arms race of unprecedented scope and peril. For Israel, the threat is even starker. The idea that a regime openly committed to its destruction is seeking to acquire the means to implement this goal is a challenge that the Israeli people and government legitimately view as a threat to their state's existence.

Indeed, this issue—the prospect of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability—hovers above all other items on the U.S.-Israel agenda. This includes both the opportunities for advancing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under the umbrella of the Annapolis peace process as well as the potential for further rounds of war and bloodshed—either between Hizballah and Israel, between Hamas and Israel, or even on the two fronts, Lebanon and Gaza, at the same time. Both the opportunities for peacemaking and the potential for conflict demand care, investment, and attention, but in the current environment, neither would have the transformative impact on the strategic calculus of regional and international actors as would Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability.

Moreover, our collective ability to wage peace or prevent conflict will, in many ways, be shaped by the success of Iran's nuclear ambitions (or, at least, the perception of inevitability about Iran's nuclear efforts). Should Iran gain a nuclear weapons capability (or should the international community resign itself to that inevitability), Iran's negative regional influence will grow, emboldening those most determined to embroil the region in conflict and eroding the ability of those Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs committed to reaching a secure peace based on a negotiated two-state solution.

This is an urgent matter. By all accounts, Iran continues to invest substantial funds and effort in mastering the centrifuge enrichment process and in improving its ballistic missile capability, two of the three core elements of an independent, self-sufficient nuclear weapons program. Iran persists in these activities despite unanimous UN Security Council resolutions calling on it to suspend its enrichment program, and despite a generous package of diplomatic and economic incentives, including a guaranteed supply of enriched uranium for civilian uses, to convince it to change its nuclear-related policies. According to the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued in late 2007, Iran may have enough highly enriched uranium to build a nuclear weapon in less than two years.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTION

Given both the enormity and the urgency of the challenge we face, we support the broad political consensus on the vital importance to U.S. interests of preventing Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon. The entire spectrum of policy instruments must be brought to bear to advance this objective, beginning with diplomacy and including incentives for Iran to alter its behavior on the nuclear issue.

Importantly, the Iran nuclear issue is neither just an American nor an Israeli problem. For America's other friends and allies in the Middle East and South Asia regions, the prospect of Iran gaining a nuclear weap-



ons capability is a serious danger, deepening their fears about rising Iranian influence and compelling them to consider provocative measures in their own defense that they would not otherwise contemplate. And for America's European partners, the danger of global nuclear proliferation and the risk of Iran's nuclear ambitions has convinced the European Union, with its three largest members representing it, to take the lead in international diplomacy to press for a change in Iranian behavior, while NATO has accepted the decision of others to support (and in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic, to host) ballistic missile defense—decisions made with Iran's potential for nuclear weaponry uppermost in their minds.

Indeed, concerted international action may be the key to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. As the NIE highlighted, Iran appears to have suspended the third element of its program—weaponization—in 2003, under intense international pressure and scrutiny. While there is no guarantee that Iran will either maintain that suspension or expand it to include a halt to enrichment or missile delivery programs, further international pressure could bear fruit.

Regrettably, however, the NIE's crediting past efforts to pressure Iran with partial success had the unintended consequence of reducing the sense of urgency for additional pressure. The result is that the prospects for significant strengthening of international resolve to raise the cost to Iran of continuing to pursue objectionable policies in the nuclear field are less hopeful today than they were prior to the publication of the NIE. While this situation is not irreversible, opinion on the issue may not change swiftly enough to have an impact on the pace of Iran's technical advances. The implications are profound.

For Israel, not only did the NIE transform the international approach to dealing with the Iranian nuclear program, but reactions to it by many in the United States may have heightened the inclination of some Israeli strategists to give further consideration to unilateral military action to forestall Iran's development of a nuclear capability. Israel justifiably regards this as a fundamental issue. On a professional level, Israeli intelligence analysts have doubts about both the fact and

duration of Iran's suspension of weaponization efforts and are deeply concerned about Iran's human, technical, and financial investment in the enrichment process, which many experts—by no means only Israelis—regard as the more important element of the program. With Iran's president denying the Holocaust, declaring Israel should be wiped off the map, proclaiming that the countdown to Israel's destruction is close at hand, and providing substantial funds, training, and material support to terrorist groups dedicated to that goal, it is no wonder that Israelis across the political spectrum see nuclear weapons in the hands of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran as constituting a threat to the state of Israel of unprecedented scope and seriousness. They will, as a result, always err on the side of "worst-case scenarios" in assessing timeframes for progress in the Iranian nuclear program and will consider all steps, including their own preventive military action, in order to stop or slow Iran from attaining this capability.

Our leaders will have to take these factors into account. We have an abiding commitment to the survival and security of Israel, so the potential threat to Israel of an Iranian nuclear bomb is a major concern of ours as well. But entirely apart from America's commitment to Israel's security, the United States has powerful reasons to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapons capability. We are deeply troubled about the potential havoc to be wrought by a terrorist-supporting state armed with nuclear weapons, and about the potential for Iran's proliferation to trigger a region-wide arms race. Indeed, we rightly rank the potential proliferation of nuclear weapons to terrorist groups as among our most worrisome fears. At the same time, the United States is a global power already engaged in two Middle Eastern wars that all Americans are eager to conclude at the earliest practicable moment. While the United States and Israel share the view that an Iranian nuclear capability is a grave threat, Americans may have tactical differences with Israelis on ways to compel Iran to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions.

These differences are compounded by the growing perception among Israelis, drawn from a U.S. policy debate over the appropriateness of relying on a strategy of deterrence vis-à-vis Iran, that the United States may



be reconciling itself to the idea of “living with an Iranian nuclear bomb.” Americans should recognize that deterrence is, in Israeli eyes, an unattractive alternative to prevention, because, if deterrence fails, Israel would suffer terribly. The consequence is that any suggestion that a policy of deterrence is America’s preferred option only reinforces the idea among many Israelis that, in the end, they may be left alone to bear the brunt of the Iranian nuclear threat.

These doubts are all the greater because many Israelis are not convinced that traditional deterrence—whether by the prospect of successful conventional defense or massive nuclear response—will work against a regime that has within it a significant messianic, even

of American capabilities and intentions regarding Iran’s nuclear ambitions: a growing sense of declining American influence in the Middle East and a deepening reluctance to contemplate initiatives that might embroil America (and, especially, Americans) even further in Middle Eastern conflict. Together, these trends have eroded Israeli confidence in the U.S. government’s ability to respond robustly to Middle East security challenges.

While we do not necessarily endorse the analysis of declining American influence—indeed, the United States remains the most powerful military force in the Middle East and the country to whom most Arab states turn as the indispensable broker of peace and

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apocalyptic, element. They fear that the sort of costs whose prospect deterred the Soviet Union during the Cold War—and might well deter more rational, more calculating rulers in the future—may not be sufficient in the case of Iran’s current leadership. The result is that an American commitment to deterrence, especially if seen by Israelis as a substitute for prevention, is itself likely to spur Israel to consider independent action.

THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN U.S.-ISRAEL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

For this reason, U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue, at the highest level, is more essential now than at any time in our memory. However, at precisely the moment when our common security interests demand deeper and more intensive forms of dialogue on the full range of choices regarding the Iranian nuclear program and the consequences flowing from each, the U.S.-Israel relationship suffers from two negative developments.

First, Israelis have seen the Iraq war lead many Americans to two conclusions that affect Israeli assessments

purveyor of security—that image has entered American political consciousness (and probably that of many in the region as well). Because of the close association between America and Israel, a perception of diminishing American influence necessarily impacts Israeli security. Defining policy prescriptions to address this problem is outside the mandate of our Task Force, but it is important to recognize its impact on the U.S.-Israel security equation.

Second, the U.S.-Israel relationship itself has come under unprecedented attack. Some of these critics argue that Israel has manipulated the U.S. government to act counter to the American national interest, which—if properly understood—would see Israel as a liability. The implication of this analysis is that American national interests demand greater distance from Israel, not closer cooperation. We reject that critique.

We endorse vigorous diplomatic efforts to advance a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that results in a secure peace for Israel and the Palestinians. Reaching a secure peace is a critical objective



in itself—for Israel, for the Palestinians, and for the United States—and we urge America to take the lead in this effort. While the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is one of many sources of grievance in the region, we reject the thesis that calls for distancing America from Israel as a way to promote the prospects for peace or to bolster American standing in the Middle East, as well as the suggestion that U.S. pressure on Israel to force concessions on contested issues would alter the widely held view among radical Islamists of America as the Great Satan. Similarly, there is no evidence to support the thesis that Arab states would act differently on matters of concern to the United States (such as countering Iranian regional

with the urgency and content necessary and appropriate to address the unprecedented nature of the challenge our two countries face today.

From its birth in the Ford administration to its growth and development under both Democratic and Republican presidencies, strategic cooperation between our two countries has become the operational norm in many aspects of our relationship. Today, as a result, there is an impressive structure of bureaucratic relations, coordination, and exchanges.

However, there is reason for concern that the content, candor, and substance of our dialogue have not kept pace with the institutionalization of the structures of dialogue. On the one hand, leaders of

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ambitions) if America jettisoned or downgraded its relationship with Israel. And there is no support for the idea that U.S. steps to dissociate itself from Israel or weaken Israel politically or militarily would make Arab leaders more confident or secure. To the contrary, most Arab allies of the United States would take cold comfort from America distancing itself from Israel, fearing that if America does not stick to its commitment to Israel, Washington could decide to jettison commitments to them, too.

The record of the past sixty years is that large majorities of Americans have supported Israel and its quest for security and peace. Millions of Americans embrace this relationship because of a sense of common values, common threat perceptions, common strategic interests, and a common vision of peace. On none of these issues may Americans and Israelis have a complete identity of views, but what our two countries share on each issue dwarfs what separates us.

Our main concern here is not to call for another round of institutional upgrades in the form and structure of U.S.-Israel bilateral ties. Rather, our goal is to call attention to the need to infuse the relationship

our two nations meet frequently, but there is good reason to believe that these sessions do not allow for the depth and clarity on fundamental issues that the current situation demands. On the other hand, the strategic relationship has acquired more numerous formats and more frequent discussions of political-military issues over the years, but they appear progressively to have become more technical than strategic. The apparent absence of serious, discreet, high-level discussions concerning the definition of the Roadmap to Middle East peace in 2004, Israeli military aims and tactics vis-à-vis Lebanon in summer 2006, and the merits of various alternatives to address Iranian nuclear ambitions are three examples of this trend.

TASK FORCE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above, we urge the following:

THAT THE PRESIDENT INITIATE, with the prime minister of Israel, a high-level dialogue on the most urgent security matters on our strategic agenda



so as to ensure that common threat perceptions and common interests translate into policies that are as coordinated as possible. While our nations have overcome a sometimes tense period in which intelligence matters were points of contention—concerning the Iranian nuclear program, for example—the potential to avoid candid discussion of policy options and to fall into a trap of miscommunication is regrettably real.

THAT THE PRESIDENT PROPOSE a new forum for such a dialogue. Given the profound sensitivity of issues under discussion, leaders themselves may not wish to be the interlocutors; for the same reason, they will not want the unwieldy structures that currently exist to have the mandate for these matters. Therefore, we urge each leader to identify one or two aides to represent them. These aides should be among the most trusted advisors to the president and prime minister—officials or emissaries empowered to engage in all manner of discussion with the utmost creativity and maximum discretion. Once initiated, this should be an ongoing dialogue.

THAT THE FIRST ITEM on the agenda for this forum should be a discussion of each side’s view about current and potential efforts to compel a change in Iranian behavior on the nuclear issue. This forum has special responsibility to undertake a thorough assessment of costs and benefits of each alternative, including their potential implications for other U.S., Israeli, and allied interests inside and outside the Middle East. This should cover the entire range of policy options, including:

- diplomatic engagement (including coordinating the agenda and timetable of a potential U.S.-Iran dialogue),
- political and economic pressure (including bringing Israel in as a full partner in planning discussions regarding initiatives involving the UN Security Council and U.S.-EU, U.S.-Arab, and other relevant forums),

- coercive options (such as an embargo on Iran’s sale of oil or import of refined petroleum products), and
- preventive military action.

THAT THIS FORUM also be empowered to explore, for the two leaders, understandings that would guide diplomacy on matters related to the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. This should include, for example:

- understandings on both the tactics and the strategy of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations toward a two-state solution of their conflict, from resolving differences regarding Israeli commitments on settlement policy to defining the appropriate American role in securing a permanent-status agreement;
- an agreed approach toward the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), based on the need for the latter to accept internationally endorsed requirements for participation in peace diplomacy;
- a common effort to confront Iranian support for anti-peace elements among Palestinians and in Lebanon;
- and ways to harmonize Israeli desiderata vis-à-vis peace talks with Syria and U.S. interests to preserve Lebanese independence from Syrian control.

Discussions on these important topics must be infused with the same level of candor and openness that needs to animate discussions on addressing the Iranian nuclear issue. Indeed, there is an essential connection between U.S.-Israel dialogue on Iran and on Israel’s relations with its Arab neighbors, given that Iran could trigger Hizballah-Israel or Hamas-Israel conflict as part of its larger strategy to counter efforts to compel it to change its nuclear strategy.

THAT THE PRESIDENT BEGIN a national conversation with the American people on the challenges, risks, and dilemmas posed to U.S. interests by



the potential Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, and on ways to prevent it. While this Task Force statement emphasizes the need for strengthening U.S.-Israel dialogue on the issue, it is even more important for the president to use one of the most important tools at his disposal, the bully pulpit, to raise popular awareness of the fact that Iran's nuclear ambitions are likely to trigger a surge of nuclear proliferation and raise the potential of terrorists gaining

nuclear weapons. The central argument is that preventing Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability is not special pleading for America's ally Israel—it is vital to America's own security.

Given the urgency of the challenges our two countries face together, these proposals—drafted with the inauguration of a new president in mind—are no less appropriate for the incumbent; they deserve immediate consideration.

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